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Out of the Cultural Ghetto. Theory, Politics, and the Study of Chinese Literature*

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The last few years have witnessed the appearance of a number of controversial essays and critical responses which, when brought together and examined in a concentrated manner, may well signal a crucial moment of fundamental change in the field of Chinese literature studies in America. Judging from the polemical intensity of these essays, it seems indisputable that the change has made its impact felt in the relatively narrow circle of specialists, and that it is precisely the self-enclosure of this very circle, with which many scholars in this field have become discontented, which is being broken and changed. The advent of this transformative moment is of course not without the anxiety and agony that typically mark the contingencies and ambivalence of a turning-point, but the controversies and debates deserve our careful examination not only because they manifest a sense of disorientation as well as paradigmatic change, but also because the contested issues force us to rethink the underlying assumptions of literary analysis and criticism. A sober understanding of these issues thus promises to carry implications that will go beyond the study of Chinese literature as a specific field. To the extent that it does not participate in a dialogue with studies of other literatures and does not address critical issues of interest to a wide range of audiences beyond the boundary of local specialties, the study of Chinese literature, despite the long history of that literature and its rich content, is likely to remain a narrow and marginal field as compared with the study of English or French, something of a cultural ghetto, one might even say, closed and of little interest to outsiders in the academic environment of the American university.

The challenge of theory

In order to understand the recent debates in the study of Chinese literature, I shall first mention the pressure for change coming from two different directions, to which the recent signals of change may be seen as a response from within the field of Chinese literature studies. It is undeniable that literary studies in America since the 1960s have been heavily influenced by a plethora of critical theories grounded in European continental philosophy, especially its French variety. There has been a pervasive infusion of critical theory into all the areas of literary studies, a situation Gerald Graff has characterized as a "theory explosion" (Graff,

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1987:3). As western literary theories — structuralism, deconstruction, psychoanalysis, reader-response criticism, new historicism, feminism, Marxism, and a number of others — have mainly been concerned with reading texts of the western canon in different ways so as to question, challenge, or subvert a humanistic tradition of western culture, it is not surprising that the study of English and other European literatures has been the first to bear the impact of this 'theory explosion'. The recent debates I shall soon examine, however, seem to suggest that the study of Chinese literature is now also confronted with the challenge of theory that other literatures have already faced.

Some more than symbolic gestures of this challenge have appeared when theorists in the West begin to reflect on non-western or Third World culture in relation to that of the western world. Although their reflections on the non-western often serve to set off what they understand as the western tradition, their comments on the language, literature, and culture of China present a real challenge that often has a notable impact on modern Chinese writers and critics. I shall cite as an example the works of Fredric Jameson, America's foremost Marxist critic and one of the most influential theorists, who has written not only extensively on western theory and culture, on postmodernism and late Marxism, but has also made some intriguing and provocative remarks specifically on modern Chinese literature. Jameson first interposed himself in Chinese literature studies in the form of a commentary in 1984 when he joined William Tay, Edward Gunn, and Sung-sheng Chang in the discussion of a number of important texts. As we can expect of Jameson, his critical commentary is at the same time a highly theoretical analysis based on Marxist ideas he has himself developed concerning the modes of production and the expansion of capital and market economy in postmodernity. In his analysis of Lao She's *Camel Xiangzi* as a complex narrative in which there is "a superposition of two distinct narrative paradigms", Jameson clearly tries to read this Chinese novel as in some way disclosing the problems of an incipient capitalism in a non-western context, in which the coexistence and interaction of different modes of production, and the mixture of precapitalist and capitalist mentalities, become, in the fictional world of the novel, the tension between two narrative paradigms or two forms (Jameson, 1984:67). Jameson argues that Xiangzi's passion, his precapitalist fixation on the desired object itself (the rickshaw), and the old narrative paradigm of the wheel of Fortune (Xiangzi's necessary failure) are brought into conflict with a properly "petty bourgeois wisdom", "the wisdom of capital and the market" as represented by his wife Tigress who would have Xiangzi climbing up the social ladder to join the small business class (ibid., 71). In Lao She's novel, says Jameson, this conflict is not solved but remains "an ideological double-bind, an ideological binary opposition which cannot be resolved in its own terms", and yet the very effort to reveal and dramatize such a conflict is already a significant act with "genuine political resonance of a progressive kind" (ibid., 72).

Jameson maintains that the interaction of two narrative paradigms, the tension between an inner and an outer form, are characteristic of realist literature in general, to which Lao She's novel properly belongs, while the more recent works of Wang Meng and Wang Wenxing (Wang Wen-hsing) can be read as indicative of the modernist and postmodernist moments in Chinese literature respectively. Jameson's reading of the three Chinese writers in terms of modes of production and their cultural expressions

implicitly forms a narrative in its own right, a narrative with its specific notions of temporality and spatiality that specifies modernism (and its cognate socio-economic term, modernization) as a western import, while making the definitive pronouncement that postmodernism "which articulates the logic of a new global and multinational late capitalism can no longer be considered a purely western export but may be expected to characterize at least certain other local zones of reality around the capitalist world" (ibid., 75–76). As Jameson acknowledges, his periodization of the three stages of realism, modernism, and postmodernism is inspired by Ernest Mandel's notion of the tripartite evolution of machinery under capitalism, and he sees the third stage in this cultural periodization, that is, postmodernism, as inextricably related to the last stage in the evolution of capital itself, which has now become a global totality expansive enough to include the Third World. This is "a new and historically original penetration and colonization of Nature and the Unconscious: that is, the destruction of precapitalist Third World agriculture by the Green Revolution, and the rise of the media and the advertising industry" (Jameson, 1991:36). Jameson's reading of modern Chinese literature is thus grounded in his conceptualization of modernism and postmodernism, in his "ideological mapping" of global economy and politics in which the Western World and the Third World are posed in constant tension with one another, a tension that opens up a critical perspective on the future of human history.

Some of these ideas, and especially the cultural difference Jameson detects between First World and Third World literatures, are further elaborated in a seminal essay published in 1986, where Jameson proposes to read Third World texts as 'national allegories' and offers Lu Xun's stories as "the supreme example of this process of allegorization" (Jameson, 1986:69). Conceding that what he puts forward is "a sweeping hypothesis" and "grossly oversimplified", he nonetheless argues that western realist and modernist novels and their reading are predicated on "a radical split between the private and the public, between the poetic and the political, between what we have come to think of as the domain of sexuality and the unconscious and that of the public world of classes, of the economic, and of secular political power: in other words, Freud versus Marx" (ibid., 69). Third World texts, on the other hand, do not separate the two domains and, by telling the story of a seemingly private and even libidinal nature, they simultaneously tell another story of a public and political dimension, and therefore a story of "national allegory: *the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society*" (ibid., 69, italics in the original). For Jameson, Lu Xun's stories, even though they may appear intensely personal and psychological, are exemplary of such Third World 'national allegories'.

Western readers may take Lu Xun's 'Diary of a Madman', the story of a lunatic's morbid fear of being eaten up by everyone around him, to be an interesting study of paranoid delusions, but in so doing they completely neutralize the force of this political allegory by psychologizing it and consigning it to the private domain of a pathological self. The central metaphor of cannibalism in 'Diary of a Madman' as well as in 'Medicine', Jameson remarks, clearly points to a different direction in which we must read Lu Xun's stories allegorically as revealing "a social and historical nightmare, a vision of the horror of life specifically grasped through History itself" (ibid., 71). 'The True Story of Ah Q' not only tells an allegorical story of the humiliation

of China by foreign powers, but its complexity also "shows the capacity of allegory to generate a range of distinct meanings or messages, simultaneously, as the allegorical tenor and vehicle change place", since both Ah Q and his persecutors are, allegorically, China itself, the self-cannibalistic China we have seen in 'Diary of a Madman' (ibid., 74). Allegorical structures, according to Jameson, are not so much absent as unconscious in modern western texts, where they can be deciphered only through allegorical interpretations, but "third-world national allegories are conscious and overt: they imply a radically different and objective relationship of politics to libidinal dynamics" (ibid., 80). For Jameson, Third World literature and especially the engagement of Third World intellectuals in political life and social change can offer important lessons to western intellectuals who have, precisely in separating the private from the public, the poetic from the political, lost contact with social reality and become politically ineffective. In this connection, Jameson calls for "the reinvention, in a new situation, of what Goethe long ago theorized as 'world literature'" (ibid., 68), in which Third World literature, a literature of vitality and social relevance, must occupy an important place, and its value and significance must be fully appreciated in the West, through the mediation of cultural studies.

Whatever one may think of Jameson's reading of the various Chinese works, the most interesting and productive response would not be to dismiss it too hastily as either a heavy-handed theoretical imposition or uninformed amateurism. In fact, embedded in a nexus of ideas that constitute a complicated theory of Marxism and postmodernism, Jameson's reading of Lao She and Lu Xun seems to me at times remarkably persuasive and insightful. The concept of 'national allegory', for example, highlights the vision of history and the urge for social and political change which literary texts like Lu Xun's stories themselves unfold and advocate. This concept can indeed be useful in analysing any — that is, not just Third World — literary text that discloses some sort of a utopian desire, either positively as a dream of its fulfillment or negatively as its nightmarish distortion and inversion. At the same time, however, the idea that this kind of allegory is somehow related to Third World 'nationalism' seems to me to set up a very limited and limiting framework, in the Chinese context at least, for understanding literary works, those of Lu Xun in particular. Lu Xun and many other writers of the May Fourth new literature clearly saw it as their vocation to mould a sense of the independent and responsible individual against the effacement of the self in a repressive moral and political totality, whether the patriarchal family or the society at large, and therefore they were very far from championing the cause of any 'nationalism', and indeed far from promoting the interest of any organized collectivity. Moreover, I would hesitate to concur with Jameson when he declares in absolute terms that "*All* third-world texts are *necessarily* ... allegorical" (ibid., 69, emphasis added). Not only would such a totalizing statement fail to do justice to the rich variety of heterogeneous texts worthy of the name of a literary tradition, but the very emphasis on the allegorical, i.e. the public and the political domain, is likely to prove, in the specific context of reading modern Chinese literature in general and reading Lu Xun in particular, self-defeatingly counterproductive.

I say this on the basis of copious evidence, because crude politicization has been normative in much of Lu Xun scholarship in China; it has made Lu Xun a saint of communist revolution and his texts *nothing but* political allegories subservient to

whatever ideological directives of the Communist Party are in place at any given time (see Goldman, 1985). While Jameson sees "'national allegories' as the Third World intellectuals" voluntary participation in politics, politicization in China is not a voluntary choice but a mandate laid upon all by the state apparatus, and allegorical interpretation of literary works is tightly controlled by the Party's ideological establishment. It is against the backdrop of such a uniform and uniformly allegorical reading and deification of Lu Xun in mainland China that some of the most innovative critical studies, notably Leo Ou-fan Lee's *Voices from the Iron House*, have attempted to restore this great Chinese writer to his multidimensional integrity and complexity, emphasizing precisely the personal and individual side, seeing his intellectual growth as "a series of psychological crises marked by quandary, frustration, failure, and spells of soul-searching", and his chosen goal in life unfit for "the utilitarian temper of nationalism as promoted by such luminaries as Liang Qichao, Yan Fu, and Sun Yat-sen" (Lee, 1987:3). The personality of Lu Xun as revealed in his letters, essays, and prefaces bears a thematic resemblance to the protagonist in many of his stories. Like his own creations, the writer impresses us as a fiercely individualist self, an isolated and alienated loner, far from identifiable with a clear sense of organic connection with any collectivity, let alone the entire nation.

The final tableau of 'Medicine', for example, is deeply ambiguous. A flower wreath is mysteriously placed on the grave of the revolutionary martyr, but the solitary crow perched on a nearby tree does not answer the solicitation of the grieving mother for a premonitory sign of just retribution. Focused on the textual ambiguity, Leo Lee's reading of this graveyard scene definitely aims at dissipating any effort to eliminate the indeterminacy or to explain away Lu Xun's own ambivalence toward revolution, his anxiety of being caught, one might say, in the very split Jameson evoked in his essay, the split between the private and the public, the libidinal and the political dynamics. "The crow," Lee argues, "flies in the face of any human attempt to find easy solutions and comfort, including that of the ever-eager ideological reader. The crow's message ... is ultimately indeterminate, but it certainly cancels out the mundane optimism that the flower wreath has forced upon the ending" (ibid., 68). Such a reading becomes more persuasive, and perhaps more true to the spirit of Lu Xun's own sense of history at that particular juncture of revolution and repression in early Republican China, when we recall his capsule allegory of writing, his well-known fable that depicts the writing and publication of his social satires and political allegories as a pointless and cruel act, as awakening a few light sleepers only to make them aware of the agony of death in an indestructible and suffocating 'iron house'.

The argument above does not, however, necessarily contradict Jameson's claim that Lu Xun's "Medicine" and the other stories are all allegories and that their writing was an activity with profound political ramifications. Jameson's is a powerful claim based on a powerful ideology, and to argue for or against it one must engage his position on many different issues about modernism and postmodernism, about literature and politics, about the Third World and global or multinational capitalism. Jameson's reading is formulated from his particular theoretical perspective and put to the students of Chinese literature as a question or challenge. To meet that challenge, whether one agrees with him or repudiates his views, is already to participate in a theoretical discussion. The challenge of theory is, as I see it, a welcome one

because it is at the same time an opportunity for us to open up the self-enclosure of specialization and to make the study of Chinese literature relevant to the interest and concerns of people outside the narrow circle of China specialists. In reading literary texts, we all have our critical assumptions and theoretical perspectives; even the decision to resist and reject a certain theory is in itself a theoretical position. To engage in theoretical discussion is thus important because it will make us critically aware of our own assumptions and positions which, if left implicit, unconscious, and simply taken for granted, will operate like some invisible force that would leave us in the dark.

But it would be an error to assume that the challenge can only come from western theory as some sort of an external pressure, for writers and critics in post-Mao China are producing literary and critical texts that are increasingly 'modern' or even 'postmodern', while talk of theory and postmodernism has been going on in Taiwan for quite some time. That is to say, the pressure for change also comes, as it were, from the inside as the very object of study is changing and calls for new concepts, new approaches, and new interpretive strategies that can hardly be immune from some consideration of western theory. In fact, insofar as the study of modern Chinese literature is concerned, it is extremely difficult not to put a literary text in a context that somehow includes the West or western literature. What that means for the study of Chinese literature, however, is not simply to accept whatever there is in western theory and mechanically apply it to the reading of Chinese texts. To take a truly theoretical position, I would suggest, means first and foremost to think critically of theory itself. One does not, however, arbitrarily take a position outside theory to think critically of it, for there is no theoretical position available outside theory like a fulcrum on which one could, as it were, move the mental lever of critique. The critical thinking I would recommend is not based on pure thinking, on some first principle, some ultimate explanatory power that claims to account for the real and the material exhaustively; neither can it be based on some sort of a Chinese essence that denies commensurability between Chinese and western traditions. To think critically of western theory thus means to rely on the aesthetic experience of reading a Chinese text and, in a broader context, to rely on the experience of real life in China, the experience of that economic, political, and cultural environment we call China. In our lived experience, there is a certain recalcitrance, certain things that cannot be fully accounted for in neat theoretical formulations and principles, things that may provide the basis for a position from which we can think critically. And that, I believe, is the basis of a properly theoretical position. It is from a theoretical position thus understood that I shall comment on the recent debates in Chinese literature studies.

Cultural difference and the ghettoization of culture

Perhaps few can match the forthrightness of a recent short piece by Jonathan Chaves, in which he laments the crisis of 'ideologization' of the humanities, and imputes this to the bad influence of literary theory, the coming to the field of Chinese literature studies "of the same approaches to literature that have shaken the study of English and other traditions" (Chaves, 1991:77). Literary theory, especially

deconstruction, seems to be the chief culprit responsible for the deterioration of scholarship, and Chaves singles out Stephen Owen as some sort of a fifth column sinologist who has, with his recent book *Mi-lou: Poetry and the Labyrinth of Desire*, "thrown open the portals of Chinese poetry studies to the gremlin progeny of Derrida's febrile brain" (ibid., 80). Though the tone of Chaves's article is that of an angry jeremiad, the image of an invasion by alien forces and the strong sentiment of resistance to theory have made it quite clear that the study of Chinese literature is now experiencing the effect of the 'theory explosion'. Chaves has unintentionally proved that Paul de Man was truly prophetic when he declared, more than ten years ago, that "the whole of literature would respond" to the strategy of deconstruction because there is no reason why the kind of deconstructive analysis he applied to the text of Proust "would not be applicable, with proper modifications of technique, to Milton or to Dante or to Hölderlin" (De Man, 1979:16–17). Or to Chinese literature, one might add, sadly or gleefully, depending on where one stands with regard to deconstruction. It is arguable whether Owen is a hard-core deconstructionist, but surely we should admit that Owen and Pauline Yu (another scholar criticized in Chaves's article) are influential in Chinese literature studies because they do not, in their works on Chinese poetry, shy away from considerations of theoretical issues. In fact, most scholars in this field are not against theory, and the important critical works that command our attention and respect, whether of ancient or of modern writers, whether textual studies or studies of a genre or a period, often make contributions to the understanding of Chinese literature through some comparison between works of the Chinese and other literary traditions, including that of the West, leading from a discussion of particular texts to a consideration of larger issues of theoretical or philosophical interest.

For all the angry alarms and denunciations, however, the crisis Chaves depicts is largely imaginary, and if there is anything close to a crisis, it is not that Owen or anyone else has opened the portals of Chinese poetry studies to deconstruction, but that the opening is not yet wide enough to let Chinese literature out of the cultural ghetto. In fact, as we shall see in another controversy, Owen himself is perhaps not particularly happy to let those portals open when Chinese poets themselves try to walk out of the shadow of tradition and to speak in a modern idiom. I am referring to Owen's review of *The August Sleepwalker*, a collection of poems by the young Chinese poet Bei Dao, and the protest that review has elicited from other scholars of modern Chinese poetry. Like Jameson, Owen is also talking about Chinese literature as a specimen of Third World literature, but while Jameson appreciates and calls for a reinvention of 'world literature' (Jameson, 1986:68), the invented or reinvented 'world poetry' is for Owen a creature with no value or significance, a commodity poets in the Third World try to sell to an international, that is, western, market by putting together clichés, sentimental language, and universal images peppered with a certain amount of exotic local colour. One of the hot commodities on the market is politics or the suffering of oppression, for "the struggle for democracy in China is in fashion", but to write about oppression, Owen warns the Third World poet, "does not guarantee good poetry, any more than it endows the victims of oppression with virtue. And there is always a particular danger of using one's victimization for self-interest: in this case, to sell oneself abroad by what an international audience, hungry for political virtue, which is

always in short supply, finds touching" (Owen, 1990:29). The warning may sound a little harsh to the ear, but Owen is of course right to point out that poetry is not a kind of intellectual prostitution and that there is nothing inherently good about political poetry.

The problem with this 'world poetry', however, does not end with its cashing in on Third World victimization. As 'new poetry' without history and tradition — here Owen mentions modern Chinese, Hindi, and Japanese poetries as examples — 'world poetry' turns out to be nothing but English translations of poor Third World imitations of poor translations of western poetry. "Which is to say", Owen explains, "that we, the Anglo-American or European part of the international audience, are reading translations of a poetry that originally grew out of reading translations of our own poetic heritage" (ibid., 29). This sounds very much like the typical western reader's experience of Third World literature as Jameson describes, the sense that what is being read is not new and original, "but as though already-read". For Jameson, this sense of *déjà vu* only disguises the western reader's "fear and resistance", the sense that to understand the alien text as a native Third World reader does, "that is to say, to read this text adequately — we would have to give up a great deal that is individually precious to us and acknowledge an existence and a situation unfamiliar and therefore frightening — one that we do not know and prefer *not* to know" (Jameson, 1986:66, italics in the original). To Owen as a distinguished scholar of classical Chinese poetry, however, no Chinese text would seem alien, unfamiliar, or frightening. Thus the problem can only be with the modern Chinese text which has eschewed history and "the intricate learning presumed in traditional poetries" (Owen, 1990:28). Reading Owen's review, which is elegantly written with the assurance of a great scholar conscious of his own knowledge and authority, one may have a strong impression that Chinese history has somehow ended with classical poetry, and that scholars like Owen himself are now the true custodians of "the intricate learning" that is lost and absent in modern Chinese literature.

Perhaps that is one of the reasons why Owen's review has left some other scholars unpersuaded. In her rejoinder to that review, Michelle Yeh questions the possibility of drawing a line between national and international poetry and argues that western influence on modern Chinese literature "involves a far more complicated process than the simple transmission of a literary model from one culture to another; that reception of influence is frequently predicated on intrinsic conditions and needs; that an influence cannot take place unless there is preexisting predisposition" (Yeh, 1991:94).[1] But once the fact is acknowledged that there is some foreign influence — and that is a fact no one can deny — modern Chinese poetry, according to Owen, has lost that which makes it distinctly Chinese; it is no longer Chinese poetry but mere 'world poetry'. "National poetry had a history and a landscape," says Owen. "The international poem, by contrast, is an intricate shape on a blank background without frontiers, a shape that undergoes metamorphoses. It achieves moments of beauty, but it does not have a history, nor is it capable of leaving a trace that might constitute a history" (Owen, 1990:32). Notice the past tense used in speaking about the history of 'national poetry'. The inference we are encouraged to draw from Owen's comment seems to be that modern Chinese literature has no history and that modern Chinese poets, doomed to speak an idiom not their own, are writing words

"without having won them, without having earned the right to say them" (ibid., 30). This is not just a critique of the worst of contemporary Chinese poetry, for Owen clearly thinks that Bei Dao may well be one of the best, and that *The August Sleepwalker* contains "the only translations of modern Chinese poetry that are not, by and large, embarrassing" (ibid., 30). The weaknesses of Bei Dao's poems may thus represent those of modern Chinese poetry as a whole. Having quoted some lines from Bei Dao's poems and dismissed them as empty clichés, Owen asks: "Is this Chinese literature, or literature that began in the Chinese language?" The implication is that this literature, though originally written in Chinese and exemplary of the less embarrassing part of modern Chinese poetry, has nothing Chinese about it and is intended all along to be translated into English for an international audience. Hence the next question: "For what imaginary audience has this poetry been written?" (ibid., 31).

Many of Bei Dao's poems were written in the difficult years of the Cultural Revolution when conditions for writing poetry in China were far from propitious. According to Bonnie McDougall, Bei Dao "wrote only for himself and a close circle of friends. Since open publication was so restrictive and potentially dangerous, there was scarcely any temptation for would-be writers to join the sparse ranks of official writers" (McDougall, 1985:247). Owen would have none of this romantic myth of a lonely poet writing in solitude against a repressive and hostile society, though that particular myth is perhaps a most persistent one in the Chinese tradition as well, a myth promoted, since Qu Yuan if not earlier, by Chinese poets and critics for thousands of years. At the beginning of his review, Owen has already posited a principle, what he calls "a gentle heresy, that no poet has ever made a poem for himself or herself alone. Poems are made only for audiences" (Owen, 1990:28). So Bei Dao must have written for an audience, and with an eye to future profit, an uncanny presentiment for future success, but no real talent, he wrote for an imaginary international audience who would, ten years down the road, read him in English translation. "If this had been an American poet writing in English," Owen wonders about this literary commodity, "would this book have been published, and by a prestigious press?" (ibid., 31). The implied answer is unmistakable: the so-called 'world poetry' is a fraud, its publication scandalous, and Bei Dao is one of those moral and intellectual weaklings Owen feels himself appointed to chastise.

Some have expressed dissent, however. Michelle Yeh believes that Owen, while calling attention to the cultural hegemony of the West, is himself "imposing another hegemonic discourse, one that is based on traditional poetry, on modern Chinese poetry" (Yeh, 1991:95). While Owen dislikes the fungibility of universal words and images in the translated 'world poetry', Leo Lee notes that the wording of Bei Dao's Chinese original registers a specific Beijing accent to which one must listen before one can appreciate those poems. "Homeland is a universal image; home accent may be another one", says Lee. "But you can experience the fear that reality brings to the poet only when you 'hear' in your heart the accent of the local people in Beijing while reading the poem." Poems, at least some poems, Lee continues to argue, are made for listening, and he wonders how Owen would describe the effect of listening to Tang poetry when it was chanted, presumably in the ancient accent (Lee, 1992:204). Another critic charges that Owen "has too indiscreetly taken some 'non-realistic'

Chinese works for evidence of the 'globalization' of West-centered discourse" (You, 1991:31). But are these dissenters making too much fuss about a short and occasional piece? The review is, after all, written by an authority on classical Chinese poetry as one of his intellectual excursions outside his usual turf. It would indeed be most fortunate if a scholar of classical Chinese literature were willing to step into the area of modern studies, for the willingness to pull down the usual barriers between fields of scholarly pursuit is a prerequisite for the success in the attempt to get out of the cultural ghetto. The problem with Owen's review, however, is not that he likes or dislikes a particular poet or some particular poems, but that his views tend to ghettoize Chinese literature, and to define China and the West, 'national' and 'international' poetry, "as mutually exclusive, as closures" (Yeh, 1991:95). Parodying Owen's witty title, 'The Anxiety of Global Influence', which parodies the title of Harold Bloom's famous book, *The Anxiety of Influence,* Yeh describes Owen's own view as also filled with anxiety, both the "anxiety of the dissolution of difference (between China and the world)" and "the anxiety of difference (between tradition and modernity)" (ibid., 96). In his study of Chinese poetry, as we shall see, Owen does have a predilection for cultural differences.

Chinese and western, or 'national' and 'world' poetries, Owen maintains, are incommensurable, and their incommensurability is grounded in the fundamentally different ways in which the very notion of poetry is understood in China and in the West. The intertwining of poetry with history, which is reiterated in Owen's review and used as the most important criterion to disqualify Bei Dao's work, has a specific meaning in his conceptualization of Chinese poetry. In that conceptualization, poetry in premodern China was itself history or true historical record, and the Chinese reader always approached a poem with the 'faith' that poems were "authentic presentations of historical experience" (Owen, 1985:57). Western poetry is fictional and detached from history; Chinese poetry, on the other hand, remains in a fundamental continuum with historical actuality. "The western literary tradition has tended to make the boundaries of the text absolute, like the shield of Achilles in the *Iliad,* a world unto itself," says Owen. "The Chinese literary tradition has tended to stress the continuity between the text and the lived world" (Owen, 1986:67). The curious thing about the much prized 'history' and 'lived world' is that they exist only in the past and can be recuperated only by scholars in possession of 'intricate learning'. History is always something gone and done with; it is thus by definition unavailable to modern Chinese literature. When modern poets write, for example, about oppression or the struggle for democracy, which are very much part of their experience in the lived world, they are sternly rebuked for writing inherently uninteresting political poetry and for selling themselves as literary commodities. But when they write poetry 'as poetry' with the conscious effort to escape the grip of political determinism, they can be chided for "sentimentality (or, perhaps, self-conscious posing)", which is, in Owen's diagnosis, "the disease of modern Chinese poetry" (Owen, 1990:30).

The idea that the difference between Chinese and western literatures is one between historical fidelity and creative fictionality is expressed more clearly in Pauline Yu's works. In the western tradition, she observes, the notion of literature is "predicated on a fundamental ontological dualism — the assumption that there is a truer reality

transcendent to the concrete, historical realm in which we live, and that the relationship between the two is replicated in the creative act and artifact" (Yu, 1987:5). Metaphor and especially allegory are possible in western literature precisely because of the presence of this 'fundamental ontological dualism', but they cannot exist in Chinese literature because Chinese thinking is not dualistic, because there is no notion of transcendence in Chinese philosophy, and because poetry in China is not metaphorical or fictional, but "a *literal reaction* of the poet to the world around him (sic) and of which he (sic) is an integral part" (ibid., 35, italics in the original). Chinese poems are read "not as fictional works composed *ad hoc* to create or correspond to some historical reality or philosophical truth, but as literal vignettes drawn from that reality" (ibid., 76). Even though one can cite numerous examples from the corpus of classical Chinese poetry to contradict this alleged Chinese literalism, the radical difference between Chinese and western traditions set up in Owen's and Yu's works has a tremendous appeal because some western scholars are eager to see the non-western world as a world of irreducible difference, as an intriguing heterotopia with a totally different mode of thinking and speaking, more romantic and more fantastic than anything they can hope to find in their ancient myths or medieval romances. In a sense, Jameson's appreciation of Third World "national allegories" and their "radically different and objective relationship of politics to libidinal dynamics" (Jameson, 1986:80) is not innocent of such a romantic desire to find a different non-western world that would display just the kind of difference one desires and appreciates. The difference *within* Chinese culture is largely ignored so that the relevant difference *between* the Chinese and the western can be highlighted. Thus only in the West can one find the "radical split between the private and the public, between the poetic and the political" (ibid., 69), and only in western poetry and poetics exists this "fundamental disjunction" between "two ontologically distinct realms, one concrete and the other abstract, one sensible and the other inaccessible to the senses" (Yu, 1987:17).

For those of us who read classical Chinese poetry in Chinese and believe that our Li Bai's and Du Fu's were no less creative and imaginative, that is, capable of making a fictional world of their own in poetry, than their Dantes or Miltons or Hölderlins, it is somewhat disquieting to learn that our poets could only write poetry "based on a stimulus-response method of poetic production rather than a mimetic one" (ibid., 82). Though I do not share Chaves's anti-theoretical sentiment, I do believe that he has made a valid point when he remarks that in this "dichotomy — Chinese monism vs. Western dualism — together with its implications for metaphor and allegory ... there appears to be a *denial* of something to Chinese language and thought: an ability to express abstraction" (Chaves, 1991:78, italics in the original). In this article, I am not concerned with presenting a counterargument to the conceptualization of Chinese poetry Owen and Yu have advanced in their works. I want to indicate, however, that in drawing a rigid line between China and the West, Chinese literalism and western transcendentalism, they may have done a disservice to the study of Chinese literature, that they may have closed its portals and pushed it further into the cultural ghetto, and that they may have made Chinese literature the West's culturally exotic Other more than it really is. The irony is that they have apparently done this out of their genuine love of Chinese literature, their real interest in literary theory, and their hope to find

and grasp the distinctly Chinese nature of classical Chinese poetry. They have attempted, in a word, to focus on the fundamental difference that would distinguish the Orient from the Occident, the Chinese from the western. If the predilection for difference is indeed the mandate of contemporary western theory, then the problematic formulation of cultural differences between Chinese and western traditions we find in the works of these respectable scholars may force us to rethink the relationship between western theory and the study of Chinese literature, and to explore alternative ways in which our study may contribute to the ongoing discussion of literary and cultural issues beyond the boundaries of national or linguistic enclosures.

First World theory and Third World experience

In his essay, 'Politics, Critical Paradigms: Reflections on Modern Chinese Literature Studies', Liu Kang argues forcefully for the pervasive presence of politics in all literary and cultural expressions by disclosing the underlying political agendas or assumptions of C.T. Hsia's formalist, Leo Lee's historicist, and Liu Zaifu's humanist paradigms in the study of modern Chinese literature. All the three critics, he claims, fail to disengage themselves from political concerns or to escape from politics in spite of their intention or overt protestation. Liu Kang's emphasis on the permeation of politics in all literature and literary criticism, as he acknowledges, is informed by contemporary literary theory and postmodernist debates on cultural issues. An interest in theory for Liu Kang thus also means an interest in politics, and his essay ends with a clarion call for "a certain cultural and political affiliation and involvement" (Liu Kang, 1993:38). Politics seems to be his key word, and one thing he tries to accomplish is to bridge the gap between politics as a concept in western theoretical discourse and politics as social practice in China. The former can be represented by what he calls "the Foucauldian revelation concerning the complicity of power and knowledge" (ibid., 14), and the latter, by Mao's views and the political reality in China. Though the two seem to have very different reputations in the West, Liu Kang reminds us that "Mao's conception of the relationship between politics and aesthetics might in fact have inspired Foucault's radical critique of western liberal humanism" (ibid., 14). This is meant to confirm the validity of Mao's views by connecting them with Foucault's, and once that is done, Liu Kang is able to demonstrate the truth-value of Mao's and Foucault's views about the permeation of politics by arguing that the very rejection of Mao's views by writers and critics in post-Mao China, despite their professed purpose of depoliticizing literature and culture, is in itself a political act, which "attests to Mao's view of the political nature of cultural and literary activity, rather than undermining that view" (ibid., 14). It is true that all sides engaged in a political struggle are political in their own ways, and that the effort to depoliticize literature in China is political in the sense of setting it free from the control of state power. But what is to be gained, one may wonder, by asserting that all and everything in literature and culture is political? If the assertion is indeed equally applicable to all views and activities, is it then saying nothing about the *specific political nature* of anything in particular? If critical activities are all political, one may then ask whether it is for their apolitical views or their failure

to share the politics he holds as the right kind that Liu Kang has taken the other critics to task?

Despite the apparent complexity, Liu Kang's argument seems to rest on a simple premise: contemporary western theory with its rhetoric of politics is accepted as an absolute value with the power of legitimation in literary and cultural studies, so once Mao (that is, a local political theory and practice) is seen as in conformity with, and even anticipation of, Foucault (that is, western theory), Mao's views can be thought to have been validated through this connection. For me, however, the premise of this logic is not axiomatic, so the connection of Foucault with Mao does not lead me to the conclusion that we should therefore accept the truth of Mao's views via Foucault, but rather that we should think twice about Foucault because of our experience of the political reality in China. Foucault, as Stanley Rosen also observes, indeed "lapsed into a flirtation with Maoism during his later years" (Rosen, 1987:6; see also 190–93). Insofar as I can tell, the outcome of this flirtation is more likely the contamination of Foucault than the sanitization of Mao. This is, I believe, a good place to make clear what I mean by taking a theoretical position, which requires thinking critically of the theoretical premise itself on the basis of our recalcitrant experiences. While fully acknowledging the importance and the special intellectual gratification of critical theory, I nevertheless want to reiterate the necessity of testing theory with practical experience — the experience of reading as well as the experience of social reality. Theory and practice are not necessarily contradictory to one another, but neither are they always in conformity, and it is through an examination of their problematic relationship that we can arrive at a position beyond the limitations of pure empiricism and the scholasticism of pure theory.

If we accept Liu Kang's statement that "politics always permeates, in various forms, every cultural formation and institution" (Liu Kang, 1993:14), the very ubiquitous permeation of politics will make his statement a truism so obvious that it becomes, without further attention to the 'various forms', completely useless in literary and cultural studies. To proclaim that politics inhabits every cultural formation, like the assertion that every poem is made of words, hardly promises a better understanding of any particular cultural formation or any particular poem. The problem with Liu Kang's argument, however, is not just a truism about the omnipresence of politics but the danger of collapsing the crucial difference between politics in the western academy on the one hand, where the autonomy of cultural and literary activities is vouched for by a civil-society tradition, and the state politics in China on the other, where such a civil-society and its corollary pledge of individual freedom are not a political reality (see *Modern China*, 19 [April 1993] for a special issue on civil society in China). The confusion of these two different kinds of politics has made Liu Kang's essay typical of a certain American discourse of 'multicultural' studies, in which, as the Chicago Cultural Studies Group points out in a recent article, there are a number of "weaknesses in its own rhetoric: an overreliance on the efficacy of theory; a false voluntarism about political engagement; an unrecognized assumption of civil-society conditions; a tendency to limit grounds of critique to a standard brace of minoritized identities (for example, race, class, and gender); and a forgetfulness about how its terms circulate in 'Third-World' contexts" (CCSG, 1992:532).

The 'forgetfulness' mentioned last seems to me the most unfortunate mistake that can be made by those of us who do have some experience of living in a 'Third World context', that is, in a society where politics is never subject to analysis and discussion in the academic sense but is defined by the state authority alone. In China, politics does of course permeate everything from the Party organization and state institutions down to the minute details of individual life, but the result of this total politicization is for most Chinese disastrous. The claim that politics permeates everything has led to an openly declared primacy of politics, to the monopoly of state power that makes everything, literature and criticism included, subservient to the interest of the ruling few, the command of totalitarian politics. In such a situation, literary works produced to promote a certain Party line or policy, and to illustrate the truth of its claim, works that accept the job of dramatizing the Party line as the very justification of their own being, are little more than political propaganda of the dullest kind. The dreary experience of reading a novel or watching a play made solely to indoctrinate is also, in its own distasteful way, unforgettable. Liu Kang castigates C.T. Hsia for his "modernist biases" in canonizing the works of Shen Congwen, Qian Zhongshu, and Zhang Ailing, and for his "favorable readings of 'symbolist' works of [these] non-leftist writers" (Liu Kang, 1993:18, 19). To be sure, aesthetic taste is personal, but given the social and political conditions under which aesthetic taste is shaped in China, I doubt Liu Kang would *really* feel that "the communist novel *A Thousand Miles of Lovely Land* by Yang Shuo" (ibid., 20) is preferable to the works of Shen Congwen, Qian Zhongshu, and Zhang Ailing. In the relatively open and relaxed atmosphere of the 1980s, it is precisely the latter group of writers that were rediscovered by Chinese readers and critics on the mainland, while Yang Shuo and the other Party hacks quickly fell into oblivion. That is a fact of the reading experience in a Third World context that simply cannot be ignored or discounted to accommodate one's affiliation with First World theory. On the contrary, it is precisely such an unforgettable experience, the result of total politicization we have known in our own world, that ought to give us pause in accepting the influential 'Foucauldian revelation' and applying it to the situation in China.

Indeed, our Third World experience may sometimes appear to impede our total absorption or endorsement of First World theory, but that experience is part of our own being, our identity or historicity, which cannot be truly suppressed or separated from our historical consciousness. Moreover, that experience forms the very basis of our ability to know, to understand, and to gain some valuable insight: valuable because it is obtained from a perspective not wholly contained by western theory. Perhaps our insight is valuable not just for ourselves but for western critics as well. "When western academic intellectuals announce a plan to intervene politically," again as the Chicago Cultural Studies Group observes, "that desire is enabled by a civil-society matrix, which is not often reflected in the plan" (CCSG, 1992:534). Perhaps our sensitivity to politics may help make that matrix more visible, and our experience of total politicization may help forestall any unwanted consequences of politicization in real life. That is to say, our experience may help western critics realize that "If politicization erases the boundary between the academy and public discourse, the result will not be a gain in relevance but the loss of the very ideal sought by politicization: the ideal of multiple cultural spaces all protected from invasion by each

other or by the state" (ibid., 534-35). In that sense, then, our experience may prove to be an intellectual asset rather than an impediment to be eliminated, and the moment we feel that our "Chinese experience" is putting in question some concepts of western theory which we are expected to confirm, that may indeed be a moment of possible insight. That is, I believe, what Hans-Georg Gadamer means when he remarks that "Every experience worthy of the name thwarts an expectation. Thus the historical nature of man (sic) essentially implies a fundamental negativity that emerges in the relation between experience and insight". "Thus insight," he continues, "always involves an element of self-knowledge and constitutes a necessary side of what we called experience in the proper sense" (Gadamer, 1989:356). The reliance on experience, I would argue, thus has a hermeneutic significance in literary and cultural studies; it has nothing to do with the anti-theoretical position; on the contrary, it provides a basis for a truly theoretical position, namely, a position which is not blind to its own critical assumptions and which can make theory work not as dogma, but as a powerful instrument of analysis and critique.

It may be edifying, in this connection, to examine the uneasy relationship between experience and theory as evident in the recent works of some Chinese critics. When contemporary western theories of literature were first introduced to the Chinese readership in the early 1980s, most critics welcomed their arrival with unreserved support and enthusiasm because they saw in the new theories not only the possibility of different approaches to the study of literature, but a possible liberation, at long last, from the Maoist orthodoxy and its political determinism that had long crippled both literature and criticism in China. As the contact with western theory deepened, however, especially when some of the critics came to the West in exile after the June crackdown on the Chinese democracy movement, the conflict between western theoretical discourse and Chinese experience began to emerge. One debate, which already started years ago, has to do with the question of influence and authenticity, that is, whether the experimental literature in post-Mao China is legitimately modernist or just poor imitations of western modernist works. Many critics now see this debate as largely pointless because it takes for granted a simple lineal route of influence, which always goes from a western source to a Chinese receptacle. The more interesting question, as the critic Li Tuo now asks, is whether westernization is the only choice for Chinese literature, a choice that excludes all other alternatives? We should not forget, he reminds us, that all the argumentation about 'modernization' and 'modernity' is, after all, "a discourse representing a certain concept of power", and therefore should not be seen as the only 'truth' or 'law' (Li, 1991:71). Here we can detect a sense of discontent with the hegemonic discourse of western modernism and postmodernism, or western theory in general.

The situation is dramatized quite revealingly by Liu Zaifu, who had expressed his enthusiastic support of western theory when he was director of the Institute of Literature in the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and editor of the influential journal *Wenxue pinglun* (*Literary Criticism*). In a recent essay significantly entitled 'Farewell to the Gods', Liu Zaifu clearly articulates his disenchantment with western theory, which is apparently shared by some other Chinese critics as well. To some extent and in an interesting way, this essay is also a contribution to the debate on influence and authenticity. He argues that Chinese writers and critics in the entire modern period have always been 'stealing' theoretical apparatus from

foreigners — the Germans, the Russians, the French, and the Americans — and have consequently lost their originality and lived "in a ubiquitous spiritual hell created by others in a variety of forms". Therefore, the task Chinese critics must now fulfil at the close of the twentieth century, says Liu, is "to walk out of the shadow of the hell of others" (Liu, 1991:127). The hellish shadow in Liu's essay turns out to be a huge one that consists of every radical social and cultural theory introduced into China since the 1920s, all of which, he contends, become one or another sort of "tyrant of aesthetics" and share the traits of "totalitarianism packed in the gilded wrapper of revolution" (ibid., 129). In contemporary China, a Russian tyrant reigns over the literary scene, namely, the idea that literature should 'reflect' life, an idea originated by V. I. Lenin and further developed into the principles of 'socialist realism'. It is against this tyrannic 'reflection theory' that Liu Zaifu has himself proposed the theory of 'literary subjectivity' in order to offer a new 'philosophical foundation' for Chinese literary studies. From the vantage point of an intellectual in exile, Liu can now put it unequivocally that his theory of 'literary subjectivity' ultimately aims to "transcend the limitations and the totalitarianism of politics and ideology" (ibid., 131). In the works of Ah Cheng, Han Shaogong, and the other 'nativist' writers, Liu argues, there is evidently a conscious effort to "return to our spiritual home" out of the shadow of 'Europeanization', while in literary theory, the same tendency is embodied in a "return to subjectivity" and a "return to the text" (ibid., 129). Conceived as a theoretical programme to lead contemporary Chinese literature and criticism out of the spiritual hell of state politics, Liu Zaifu's theoretical effort is thus first and foremost an effort of depoliticization.

Since he came to America after the June Fourth crackdown and is now able to have close contact with western literary theory, Liu Zaifu quickly realizes that political engagement rather than depoliticization is currently the respectable position for most western critics to take. Moreover, a theory of 'subjectivity', and indeed the very concept of 'subject', are very much deconstructed and discredited in the West, no longer considered viable for critical thinking. If Liu Kang's call for 'cultural and political affiliation and involvement' follows the tendency of mainstream western theory, Liu Zaifu's programme of depoliticization clearly represents a different mode of thinking that may appear embarrassingly outmoded *vis-à-vis* contemporary western theory. Liu Zaifu acknowledges that there is obviously "a serious time lag between the cultural needs of the East and the West". As a result, a number of questions constantly bedevil Chinese intellectuals: How should we overcome this time lag? How, from a cultural perspective in which subjectivity is still something lacking, should we understand a postmodernist theory that has "decentered the subject"? For Liu Zaifu, this constitutes "a kind of *fin de siècle* anxiety for Chinese scholars" (ibid., 133). If he sees in China a 'socialist realist' tyrant, in the West he sees a different one, 'the tyrant of signifiers', one that has reduced subject to a meaningless abstraction (ibid., 134). Evidently, the 'gods' to whom Liu Zaifu bids farewell are not just old ones like Plato and Aristotle, Croce and Spingarn, Freud and Darwin, Lukács and Brecht, Plekhanov and Chernyshevsky, but also the new postmodernist and poststructuralist 'gods' like Barthes, Lacan, Derrida, and Foucault.

The impulse to escape from the shadow of other people's hell reminds us, quite unexpectedly, of Owen's disapproval of what he refers to as the anxiety of global

influence, for both wish to achieve some kind of a purity, in thinking as well as in style, that would guarantee the authenticity or originality of something uniquely or distinctly Chinese. The desire for originality in critical thinking totally independent of any influence of the Other, as seen from the perspective of postmodernist theory, can only be a romantic and utopian desire that arises from the very condition of its own impossibility. In a critique of Liu's essay which appropriates some deconstructive terminology, Wu Xiaoming argues that Liu Zaifu's essentialist rhetoric, his 'myth of originality' and his 'dream of pluralism', belie his nostalgic desire for a 'pure origin'. The very idea of 'farewell to the gods', Wu contends, is a western metaphor, and Liu's sense of the *fin de siècle* already reveals a typically western sensibility (Wu, 1991:152, 156). Wu is quite right to maintain that "it is possible to define the Self only through the Other. The myth of the Self can be generated only by forgetting or suppressing the conditions that make the Self possible as Self, by forgetting or suppressing the fact that the Self is also an Other to the Other" (ibid., 153). His critique of Liu Zaifu helps remind us not just of the impossibility of constructing an isolated Chinese essence but also of the danger of self-enclosure, the danger of locking oneself up in a cultural ghetto while imagining a critical space of one's own. In fact, given the condition of our own times, the interrelatedness of thinking in a global context is a fact no amount of desire for ethnic or cultural essence can overlook or deny. The first thing for Chinese critics to do, then, is not to get out of the shadow of others as so many alien and alienating 'gods', but to see these 'gods' as merely human, just like us. That is to say, the task is not so much to think independently of others as to think critically of what others have already thought, because, as I see it, it is only by working out the thought content of others that we may arrive at our own independent thinking and critical position. Insofar as thinking or knowledge is concerned, originality and true freedom can be achieved only by an accumulative effort and a constant interaction with others or other minds.

However, if we do not accept western intellectual authorities as 'gods', we may wonder whether Wu Xiaoming realizes that equivalent conceptualization is possible in traditional Chinese philosophy when he claims that "the concepts of 'man' (sic) and 'subjectivity' are themselves borrowed from western philosophy", and when he further characterizes these concepts as "constructs in western philosophical discourse since Descartes" (ibid., 153). Wu's argument wholly relies on the deconstructive metanarrative as told by Lyotard and Derrida. But if we do not accept deconstruction as the only western theoretical discourse, we shall be able to see that, even within western literary theory, the debate on subjectivity is by no means a dead issue, and that the 'time lag' Liu Zaifu imagined between the East and the West also inhabits the West itself. For the traditionally marginalized Other in western societies, for women, for blacks, and so on, regaining subjectivity is as viable an ambition in that context as it is for Liu Zaifu in the cultural context of China. While it is justifiable for western critics to deconstruct "the western male subject" that has "long been constituted historically for himself and in himself", as Henry Louis Gates, Jr. argues, "to deny us the process of exploring and reclaiming our subjectivity before we critique it is the critical version of the grandfather clause, the double privileging of categories that happen to be *preconstituted*". Thus Gates considers it an unpleasant irony that "precisely when we (and other third world peoples) obtain the complex wherewithal to define

our black subjectivity in the republic of western letters, our theoretical colleagues declare that there ain't no such thing as a subject" (Gates, 1992:111). In a truly pluralist spirit, then, we may say that there are subjects and then there are subjects, just as there are politics and then there are politics. The important thing for a theoretical consideration of these different phenomena and different positions is to be alert to the very plurality of categories in things and in theories. To accept uncritically any category or any theoretical approach as the only valid one is to give up one's responsibility to think and to criticize, while that responsibility is precisely what critical theory is all about.

A plea for openness

If there is anything that we can draw as some useful inference from this brief examination of the recent changes and debates in Chinese literature studies, the first and foremost that comes to my mind is a sense of openness. This at least means two things: first, it is to open the door of Chinese literature studies to more works (modern and contemporary as well as ancient and classical) and to more methodologies (including the various approaches based on western literary theory); and second, it also means to open up one's views to the challenge and revision of others. If scholars working on Chinese literature are more open in both these ways, their works are more likely to have a notable impact not only in their own special field, but also in the larger context of cultural studies.

Openness certainly implies tolerance and flexibility, and some of the polemical rhetoric and intensity would indeed seem unnecessary if we are more conscious of the limitations of our own specialty, our own political views and critical assumptions, and if we are at the same time more willing to engage with other people's views and interpretations. The barrier that needs to be pulled down is the rigid opposition between China and the West, which is sometimes misconstrued as an even more dubious one between the old and the new, between tradition and modernity. If we remember that Chinese culture in its long and complicated history has never been a monolithic but a heterogeneous and syncretic tradition, that a living culture has as much claim to the present as to the past, and that in our times it is neither possible nor desirable to separate China from the rest of the world, then to isolate and grasp a pure Chinese essence will appear as both pointless and impossible. Although every poem, every novel, and every work of art worthy of its name is unique in the sense of being new and distinct from all others, uniqueness is ultimately a matter of degree. No work of literature as a socially meaningful symbolic structure is so unique as to deny any comparison with other works, works in other mediums, other languages, and other traditions. The question is not whether comparison is possible but whether it is interesting, useful, and productive. To break through the enclosures of the study of classical as opposed to modern Chinese literature, the study of Chinese as opposed to comparative literature, and the study of literature as opposed to theory and criticism, would be the first step in our effort to get out of the cultural ghetto.

Openness thus entails a willingness to face the challenge of theory, but at the same time it also calls for a critical spirit that renders theory itself open to scrutiny and

examination. Openness is not a passive acceptance of all the claims western theory makes about literature, culture, politics, and so forth; it does not acknowledge theoretical authorities as 'gods', but treats Chinese critical positions as possibly theoretically viable or vulnerable on exactly the same grounds as western ones. A critical dialogue can be carried out only among interlocutors who are equals with a genuine desire for mutual understanding, and only when the exchange of ideas are constantly recontextualized to make theoretical formulations intelligible in specific cultural and political situations and relevant to the reading of particular texts. The matter of difference and similarity, for example, always needs to be settled in a particular context. Though I think there is an overemphasis on cultural difference in contemporary theory and have tried to argue for similarity and commensurability, I neither do nor want to obliterate all differences between China and the West, Chinese literature and western literature. A critical position of openness ought to be a position that moves and changes in response to the present needs and circumstances, but it is at the same time a firm stance once the needs and the circumstances are clearly understood. It is from such a critical position that I have raised some questions about Jameson's notion of Third World literature as 'national allegories' and Liu Kang's argument for political engagement and affiliation. I am perfectly willing to see the viability of their views in a different context, but when we consider the specific situation of Chinese literature and criticism, depoliticizing in the sense of setting literature and literary studies free from the ideological control of the state, at the present at least, seems to me a more effective strategy than the endorsement of politicization. It is also from such a critical position that I propose to reconsider the problem of 'subjectivity' as a still meaningful theoretical problem in China. If women and blacks in America still need to constitute or reclaim their subjectivity, why should anyone deny the same to the Chinese in China? From a deconstructive point of view, this may appear to be a nostalgic falling back to old-fashioned humanism and metaphysics, but deconstruction should not be treated as the universal truth it has aimed to deconstruct, and a truly critical attention to difference should examine each particular problem in its own context.

The openness I have proposed to consider as an important critical attitude, both as the opening of the special field of Chinese literature studies and as the opening of one's own views and positions, comes as a result of lived experience, a Chinese experience of living in a claustrophobic enclosure, political and otherwise, which Lu Xun's impressive metaphor of the 'iron house' may still be borrowed to describe. If in their attempt to destroy that 'iron house', Lu Xun and the other intellectuals of the May Fourth generation had polarized tradition and modernity in radical but perhaps destructive ways, Chinese intellectuals 70 years later still find themselves in largely the same situation and face many of the same problems our predecessors faced at the dawn of the twentieth century. Standing at the close of the century and with the hindsight of history, however, we may have the advantage to rethink the strategies for dismantling that 'iron house', and indeed to see the many cracks and fissures in that house which is, after all, not built of such indestructible iron as we had thought. Perhaps by pursuing openness rather than polarization, we may finally be successful in opening up China to a new and promising future, and in achieving that goal, the openness in the study of Chinese literature may be

seen as part of a general spirit, a vital part of a great vision that will lead us into a more hopeful future in the next century.

Note

1 The reference here is to the page numbers of the Chinese version of Michelle Yeh's rejoinder to Owen published in *Jintian (Today)* 1 (1991), but the text I am quoting is the English version forthcoming in *Modern China*. I want to thank Professor Yeh for providing me a copy of her own English text.

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